

### THIRD SUNDAY OF LENT

Quite consistently in the Gospel According to St. John, as in today's Gospel reading (John 4:5-42), water is a sign of the Holy Spirit. Those who, by God's gift, have Faith in Jesus Christ, receive a spring of water, welling up to eternal life; that is to say, they receive the Holy Spirit, Who dwells in them sustains their Faith, nourishes their Hope, and guides them along the way of Love into Eternal Life.

People who are full of Faith, Hope, and Love, live distinctive lives, but what makes their lives distinctive is Faith, Hope, and Love, not any particular lifestyle. For example, some people who are full of Faith, Hope, and Love, embrace literal and complete poverty. Others use their wealth intelligently for economic development and generously to support works of charity. For another example, some people of Faith, Hope, and Love embrace the chastity of celibate life. Others serve God in the chastity of married life. All are called to generosity in the service of God and Neighbor, but not all are called to literal poverty. All are called to chastity, but not all are called to celibacy.

The basic principle here is that the identifying mark of Christian life is not any particular lifestyle, but a life in the Holy Spirit, a life of Faith, Hope, and Love. God calls particular members of His People to various ways of living out Faith, Hope, and Love. Lifestyles differ, but Faith, Hope, and Love are the same.

One concrete example of this principle, brought to mind by current events, is military service. Some good Christians today engage enthusiastically in military service. Other good Christians feel themselves called to avoid military service. Not only is this the case today, this was the case in early Christian centuries. Faith, Hope, and Love are absolute among Christians, but neither military service, nor rejection of military service, are absolute among Christians.

This can confuse some non-Christian observers, who expect the Christian ethic to reflect a superficial consistency. In 295, in Roman Africa, a young man named Maximilianus, twenty one years, three months, and eighteen days old - and five feet, ten inches tall, according to the court records - was executed for refusing obey what a much later generation would call a "draft" into the Imperial Roman Army (the imperial army was normally a volunteer force, but in emergencies imperial law insisted on the right to conscript physically fit men of military age). The Proconsul was genuinely puzzled by Maximilianus.

"You are a young man, and the profession of arms suits your age. Be a soldier."

"My army is the army of God, and I cannot fight for this world. I tell you I am a Christian."

"There are Christian soldiers serving our rulers Diocletian and Maximian, Constantius and Galerius"

"That is their business. I also am a Christian, and I cannot serve."

"But what harm do soldiers do?"

"You know well enough."

Roman persecution of Christians was off and on, and much more off than on. In 295, it had been off for decades (the last big burst of imperial persecution was yet to come). For a generation, the Church had enjoyed peace. During that peace, many Christians had entered imperial military service, as both the Proconsul and Maximilianus knew perfectly well. Knowing that some Christians were in the imperial army, a few of them quite distinguished, the Proconsul had no sympathy for Maximilianus' refusal to join the army. He knew that Maximilianus was no coward, for the penalty of his refusal was death. What was going on?

What the Proconsul could not understand was what today we call “conscientious objection.” For some Christians, the service of Neighbor permits learning how to use disciplined and lawful force to defend the innocent and the common good. For other Christians, however, the service of Neighbor forbids doing any harm to any human being, even in a good and necessary cause. Some Christians, by their lawful and disciplined military service, bear witness to the simple truth that in this world, still damaged by sin, the innocent cannot be safe and the common good cannot be secure unless there are men who can fight and defeat violent criminals and violent gangs, including the gangs that masquerade as governments (as St. Augustine memorably observed, without justice, what is a government but a huge gang?) Other Christians, however, are called to bear witness to the constant superiority of mercy, and to the ultimate triumph of peace, by using their talents, and even their bodies, only to heal the suffering and nurture the needy.

Wisely, under divine guidance, Christ’s Holy Church has never forbidden Christians to engage in military service, but it has always asserted that some Christians have a particular calling never to participate in doing physical harm to anyone, even in a just and necessary cause. Thus, on March 12 the Church remembers St. Maximilianus, a martyr for refusing military service, while on March 10 the Church remembers the 40 Martyrs of Sebastea, all soldiers who served the Roman Army well, but who refused to renounce their Christian Faith when the military authorities unexpectedly turned against Christianity.

For the military authorities to turn against Christianity in 320 was particularly unexpected, since Rome’s leading soldier, the Emperor Constantine, was openly favorable to Christians (his own Baptism would come much later). Constantine, one of those scary men who was never in a fight he didn’t win, ruled the western part of the Empire, and made it clear that he liked the Christians and even believed in the God proclaimed by Christianity. Not everyone in the Roman Army loved Constantine, however. Some generals in the eastern part of the Empire, not under his rule, signaled their opposition to pro-Christian Constantine by seeking to purge the army of Christians. Forty young soldiers in the garrison of Sebastea (part of Turkey today) were, accordingly, commanded to reject their Christianity or die. They chose death over dishonor and infidelity, and were frozen to death, tied up nearly naked in shallow water on a winter night (when the inevitable civil war broke out, Constantine won, as he always did, and imperial persecution of Christianity ceased forever).

So, here we have the good Christian soldiers of Sebastea and the conscientious objector Maximilianus, good soldiers and a resolute non-soldier. They were not opposed. All believed in Jesus Christ, and all obeyed the call to serve God and their Neighbor. All served God by publicly professing their Christian Faith. The Martyrs of Sebastea sought to serve their Neighbor by lawful military service in defense of the common good. Maximilianus sought to serve his Neighbor by devoting mind and body only to healing and to nurturing.

Christianity, in the sense of one Faith in Jesus Christ, one Hope in His Promises, and One ethic of Love, really is “one size fits all.” Christianity, in the sense of a particular lifestyle, definitely is not. There is not a single Christian lifestyle. There is, however, a single Christian Faith in Jesus Christ. There is also a single Christian Love, proved by God in that, while we were sinners, Christ died for us, a love now shared with us through the Living Water, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.